



# ASIAN AFFAIRS

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of civil society and of a state which usurps what should be the functions of such a society.

Dru Gladney, applying the sociological concept of 'relational alterity', offers a brilliant but highly theoretical analysis of the Turkic nations cutting across the nation-states of Central Asia, China and the Middle East. Further essays deal with the region as a whole. Vyacheslav Belokrenitsky examines the historical stages in the formation of special relations between Russia and Central Asian states and argues that Russia is destined to play a vital role in Central Asia. This view is contested by Tchangiz Pahlevan and Gareth Winrow, who postulate the inevitable diminution of Russia's influence in the region and its replacement respectively by Iran or Turkey. Turning to an examination of specific problems within individual Central Asian republics, the essays by Victoria Koroteyeva and Ekaterina Makarova and by Gulnar Kendirbaeva are of particular value in that they are based on thorough field-research and unknown earlier sources. The first examines the role of the Uzbek *mahalla* (local community) in the creation 'from above' of post-Soviet Uzbek national identity. The other analyses the Kazakh national debate of the early 20th century and its relevance to the present. The contribution by Cay Dollerup on the language situation in Uzbekistan, however, is marred by unfounded data and factual mistakes.

The volume is overpriced, but offers useful material for the specialist reader.

GALINA M. YEMELIANOVA

**Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry.** By Peter Nasmyth. Caucasus World, Curzon, Richmond, 1998. Pp. 306. Maps. Illus. Appendix. Bibliog. Chronology. Index. £25. Hb. ISBN 0 7007 0955 X

This is Peter Nasmyth's second book about Georgia, the land of a nation "of dramatic temperament" (p. 89). The book is divided into two parts, describing the pre-independent and shortly thereafter independent Georgia. The author is a thoughtful and sympathetic witness of the dramatic and painful period of the country's transition from "losing its past" to rushing towards a "terrible freedom" (p. xii); terrible, because the first years of long-cherished independence were marked by a fratricidal civil war and brutal wars against Georgia's ethnic minorities, which were accompanied, not unpredictably, by dire economic deprivations.

The narrative is informative, highly personal and often lyrical, abundant in colourful descriptions of places and characters, and peppered with good humour, numerous allusions from Russian, Western and Georgian literature and real insights into many aspects of the complex phenomena of Georgian culture and national character. Occasional criticism of certain features of Georgian life is sympathetic, never sarcastic. The author tries not to be moralistic and often attempts to extract a moral lesson for the West, rather than imposing Western standards and attitudes.

He visited most regions of Georgia and describes them with great attention to detail and with captivating (if not always necessarily accurate) excursions into Georgia's rich history. The chapter recounting his visit to Stalin's home and museum in his native Gori, still a shrine for many Georgians, invokes André Gide's observations on the theme (made during the latter's own trip to Soviet Georgia back in the 1930s) and perhaps forms, together with some others (for example, that on Svaneti), the best in the book. By contrast, the chapters on Abkhazia (especially the first one) are somewhat less impressive, lacking real insights into Abkhazian character and the complexities of the Abkhazian problem.

The book is provided with excellent photos, maps and old pictures. Illustrations are sometimes no less eloquent than the text itself, such as the picture of Eduard Shevardnadze with an icon in the background, where formerly Lenin's portrait hung, symbolising the Georgian leader's smooth transition from a devoted Communist atheist to Christian believer, just as the Kremlin has been replaced for Georgians by the White House. The author somewhat obsessively attributes the prefix 'Soviet-' to those buildings or artefacts of the Soviet period which he regarded as ugly or absurd, as if anything built in Georgia, or indeed elsewhere in the Soviet Union, between 1921 and 1991 had any chance of being non- (or ?anti-)Soviet. The Communist regime, however repressive, on the other hand promoted the development of local cultures, especially those of the "titular nations", which accounts for the unprecedented flourishing of Georgian culture and the growth of the Georgian cultural elite.

Like many of their Caucasian neighbours, the Georgians are plagued by their own history, and for them, as one Georgian remarks, their "past is still the most valued part of themselves" (p. 6). "Living in the past"—"a 12th century psychology living in the 20th century" (p. 58)—still remains a typical Caucasian phenomenon, when national aspirations are directed not towards the building up of a modern democratic society and competitive economy, but to restoring a mythologised past glory. "For the great majority," the author writes, "the only reliable 'self' they knew existed not in some hazy, free-market future but in the memories, iconography and borders of an independent, individualistic past. The consequences had been dire" (p. 203). This informative and excellently written book will certainly help the Western reader better understand the complexities of the past and present of this ancient Transcaucasian nation.

VIACHESLAV CHIRIKBA

**The Abkhazians: A Handbook.** By George Hewitt (ed). Caucasus World, Curzon, Richmond, 1999. pp. 288. Illus. Notes. Index. £30. Hb. ISBN 0 7007 0643 7

Western readers are hardly acquainted with Abkhazia, an autonomous republic of Georgia, even though the latter was one of the ancient centres of world civilisation. This book is an admirable attempt to rectify this regrettable situation. It is a product of notable scholarship by Professor Hewitt and eleven other researchers, eight of whom are ethnic Abkhazians. The editor, who has also translated the articles by the Abkhazian contributors, deserves a special credit. The volume's structure, contents and illustrations are thoroughly thought through; its main text is supplemented by useful maps and appendices, a glossary and an index. Its sixteen articles are divided thematically and stylistically into three groups: four essays of an encyclopaedic nature on Abkhazia's geography, geology and political, cultural and linguistic history; three contributions on Abkhazian history between the 18th century and 1989; and nine essays on Abkhazia's contemporary economy, politics, culture, ethnic make-up and religion.

The volume is designed to refute official Georgian historiography which since the early 19th century has consistently distorted the history of the Abkhazians. The book provides incontrovertible documentation of the Abkhazians' indigenous roots in the Western Transcaucasus and their historical background independent from the Kartvelians (the Georgians). In particular, it shows that already in the 3rd millennium BC proto-Abkhazians inhabited the region, where they created a sophisticated Maikop culture; in the early 1st millennium BC they were part of the famous Colchian culture; and in the 8th century AD a powerful Abkhazian kingdom encompassed the whole of Western Transcaucasus. Another significant